

# **DANCE IN THE DC METROPOLITAN AREA**

## **A NEEDS ASSESSMENT**



A STUDY CONDUCTED BY DANCE/USA

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# PREFACE



We are delighted to make **Dance in the DC Metropolitan Area: A Needs Assessment** available to the Washington, DC dance community as well as to members of the dance field nationwide. The publication of this study marks the continuation of research on dance communities spearheaded by locally-based concerned funders. Together with the 2002 **Dance in the San Francisco Bay Area: A Needs Assessment** and a recently completed census of dance activity in the greater Chicago area, this document adds more complexity to the understanding of the state of dance artists and their support structures throughout the United States. The national portrait of dance continues to be painted. **Dance in the DC Metropolitan Area: A Needs Assessment** becomes part of a published series of regional assessments that can guide current and future artists, administrators and funders.

Dance/USA, as the national service organization representing not-for-profit professional dance, has collected data from its member companies since its founding in 1982. For the past 10 years, under the leadership of Director of Research and Information John Munger, Dance/USA has issued an annual report on the “state of the dance field.” Now, with the Washington, DC study, we are able to take a close look specifically at the dance community residing in our nation’s capital.

What we have documented is what we have intuited at times: the greater DC area can celebrate an extraordinary talent pool of experienced and dedicated dance artists in all genres. What we have also confirmed is that there are significant stresses on this valuable cultural asset. By participating in this study, dance-makers throughout the DC area have provided us with personal perspectives and statistical data that suggest how their creativity and growth can be supported in order to contribute more effectively to the cultural fabric of this unique city and the nation. We hope that this study will initiate continuing dialogue in Washington, DC, about strategies for advancing and strengthening the art form in new and expanded ways. And we also hope that administrators, funders and educators throughout the field will use the information presented here and will convey these perspectives to younger professionals and students—our future leaders.


We express our sincere thanks to the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation for initiating this project, and The Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation and Fannie Mae Foundation for additional support that enabled the study to be fully comprehensive. We thank, as well, the many generous dance artists and supporters who participated in our research—their candid contributions made this study possible.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

 This study represents the results of a yearlong effort to conduct a factual census of the greater Washington, DC area dance community together with an assessment of significant needs and strengths in that community. The census captures a thorough listing of dance-making entities in the District and five neighboring counties together with important and useful quantitative data about those entities. The assessment employs both quantitative surveys and qualitative research throughout the dance community to define perceived needs and strengths.

Of the numerous findings developed by this process, four stand out for their widespread impact. In many cases, they help to explain other findings and are supported in turn by findings of more detailed, but limited, scope. All four are supported by both quantitative and qualitative information and analysis. A full compendium of the 19 key findings follows this executive summary.

**The Washington, DC area dance community is fragmented into numerous groups or “circles” that do not communicate well with each other and do not have stable mechanisms for collaborative efforts.** This is not to say that there are deep divisions or conflicts within the dance community. To the contrary, many in the community report a general feeling of friendliness and support among their peers and colleagues. As discussed in the section of this report titled “The Perceptual Landscape,” this fragmentation is perhaps the most important finding to emerge from this study. It is the result of many factors at work in the greater Washington environment, and it affects many of the dance community’s salient characteristics, both positive and negative.

**There is widespread agreement that diversity is the greatest strength of the DC area dance community.** Not only are dance ensembles representing many cultures and nations scattered throughout the DC area, there are also many genres, levels of achievement and types of structure. The variety of dance represented among the 186 dance-making entities captured in the census is notable. This strength in diversity bears a paradoxical relationship to the finding that the dance community is weakened by fragmentation. The presence of so many and such widely varied dance-making entities makes it inevitable that some fragmentation should be expected.

**Chronic lack of financial resources for dance in the greater Washington, DC area creates not just one but several vicious circles, trapping dance artists in circumstances that they are powerless to remedy.** Certainly, any dance community in the nation can say it does not have enough money. But dance companies often have problems that can be effectively addressed through technical support, improved communications or other internal adjustments. Better strategy is sometimes the most cost-effective option. In the Washington, DC area, however, most of the weaknesses are not due simply to lack of technical expertise, lack of experience, destructive partisanship, or anything else that can be addressed through changes of policy. Over and over, the root of a given problem is either lack of money or some issue that cannot be addressed without an infusion of money.

**Dance based in the Washington, DC area often receives less than robustly respectful treatment on many fronts, including within the field itself.** Like the lack of money cited above, this challenge can be reported by many dance communities across the nation. Washington is not especially different from other communities where dance does not receive the media coverage, recognition among policy makers, or general support and understanding that it probably deserves.

The fact that this is a common problem does not diminish the importance of its impact on the Washington area dance community. Indeed, a number of respondents to this study's surveys and interviews observed that the nation's capital should perhaps do better than it already does in this regard.

There are no silver bullet answers in these findings. There is too little agreement across the dance community about how needs might be addressed and too little consensus about how the important needs might be prioritized according to their urgency or impact. Certainly, however, some specific lines of inquiry and discussion deserve focus.

For example, the considerable diversity of dance in the Washington metropolitan area, when considered in new light, may lead to adjustments of policy at media institutions and funding organizations. The related lack of cohesion and communication between "circles" within the dance community may encourage additional discussions about a possible centralizing service organization. But, as the text of the study elaborates, views on a possible service organization were mixed, and debate over this possibility is in its infancy. Perhaps a different solution, not yet imagined, might address the need for greater cohesion and communication in the DC area dance community.

The geographic challenges described in "The Factual Landscape," coupled with the lack of performance space, suggest exploration of the need for a new medium-size theater dedicated to dance. There is support for the idea within the community, but the question of location is grave. Underlying and exacerbating this question is lack of time. Creative solutions are needed to address the dispersion of energy, time and resources among overburdened artists.

The question of visibility, image and respect for local dance-makers in the Washington community as a whole goes back to the question of cohesion and communication. It will take time, money and coordinated efforts to change the attitudes of an entire city, its media, its critics and its policy-makers. How might the richness and diversity of the DC area dance community be made common knowledge and a source of national pride? How might the region's dance community come to speak with one voice, and should it even do so?

Finally, this study makes the case that more money is needed. Even if this point is granted—and it surely will meet with argument of various kinds from various quarters—the questions then arise how new dollars are to be found and how they are to be allocated. If these questions are not addressed, most of the other findings in this study are likely to see little headway made with problems and little advantage taken of strengths.

The willingness of the Washington, DC area dance community and the generosity of the foundations supporting this study are a testament to the potential for growth and improvement in the DC area dance community. The researchers and writers of this report are grateful to all concerned for their cooperation and support. Dance communities across the country have tried too often and for too long to make strategic decisions and visualize new possibilities in the absence of comprehensive information about the makeup and shared perceptions of their own communities. We hope that the value of this study will inform extraordinary progress for the Washington, DC area dance community and that other metropolitan areas across the nation will take note of Washington's example.

# COMPILATION OF KEY FINDINGS

Readers of the full report will find that the discussion of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges for the Washington, DC dance community is broken into numerous subsections, each of which is prefaced by one or more “key findings.” These findings are compiled here as a quick reference or summary. They are presented in the same order in which they occur in the text of the full report.

## From The Factual Landscape

- ★ Dance-makers in the greater Washington, DC area are widely separated. Even within the District itself, they do not cluster tightly.
- ★ The majority of dance-makers are plugged in to the Internet and related forms of electronic communication, but the “unconnected” minority are still significant.
- ★ Host institutions play an important role for a significant number of newer and smaller dance-making entities.
- ★ Culturally Specific and Other dance-makers considerably outnumber Ballet and Modern dance-makers in greater Washington, DC.
- ★ Exact definitions of genres are elusive, and many in the field have strong opinions about the use and misuse of classifications.
- ★ Total economic activity for Washington area dance-making entities is about \$15 million per year, a relatively low number compared to similar estimates in other large communities.
- ★ The DC area dance community is young in the sense that few companies have founding dates before 1970, but experienced in the sense that the median company age is 10 years and the average is 14.
- ★ The majority of dance artists working in greater Washington as dance-makers or as leaders of dance-making entities have significant professional experience.
- ★ DC area dance entities exhibit a range of company structures typical of large urban areas across the nation.
- ★ Many companies are clearly undercapitalized, underfunded and understaffed.
- ★ Washington area dance-making entities perform locally, nationally and internationally, reaching an audience of more than one million per year.
- ★ Large audiences are not necessarily correlated to factors such as budget size, longevity of company, or other traditional indicators of success.
- ★ Performance space is a serious issue. Many companies ferret out an incredible variety of non-traditional and lesser-known performance spaces, but many of these may be poorly equipped for dance.

## From The Perceptual Landscape

- ★ There is widespread agreement that diversity is the greatest strength of the greater Washington, DC area dance community.
- ★ No single outstanding opportunity or advantage for dance in the Washington, DC environment was clearly identified by a majority of survey and interview respondents. Numerous topics received mention, but there was even disagreement about some of these.
- ★ Groups within the Washington, DC dance community do not communicate well with each other and do not have stable mechanisms for collaborative efforts.
- ★ Dance based in the Washington, DC area often receives less than robustly respectful treatment on many fronts, including within the field itself.
- ★ The political and international role of Washington, DC as a world capital is at best a mixed blessing for the arts because the focus is elsewhere.
- ★ Chronic lack of financial resources creates not just one but several vicious circles, trapping dance artists in circumstances that they are powerless to remedy.